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SUBJECT: RIYADH RECORD: SEPTEMBER 1-15

REF: A. A) RIYADH 7193
[B. B\) JEDDAH 606](#)
[C. C\) RIYADH 7097](#)
[D. D\) RIYADH 7211](#)

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission David Rundell
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Saudi Court of Grievances postponed a hearing on the novel "Girls of Riyadh" after the news of the proposed hearing sparked robust debate in the media. The proposal to shift the women's prayer area in Mecca has been rejected. The SAG demands clarification from the Vatican following controversial remarks by the Pope on Islam. The Shoura Council debated a draft bill on cyber crime, particularly as it relates to the perceived moral "abuse" of blue tooth cell phone technology. Homaidan al-Turki's Colorado sentence provoked negative public reaction in Saudi Arabia. END SUMMARY.

Women's Rights Preserved: Publication and Prayer Continue

[1](#)2. (C) The Saudi (Islamic) Court of Grievances postponed until September 27 a hearing on the controversial novel "Girls of Riyadh" amidst much media outcry against the hearing. Two Saudi men brought the case to the court on the charge that both the novel and the author's actions violate Saudi's publishing law, and claimed that the novel insults Saudi women. The court will determine whether the novel should be withdrawn from bookstores and if the author, Rajaa al-Sanie should be fined. (Note: The novel, which was published last September in Lebanon, was also the source of significant controversy during Riyadh's second annual book fair held earlier this year. The Ministry of Culture drew significant criticism for allowing the fair to showcase the book, but defended that decision on the basis that the novel exemplified the talent among female Saudi authors and did not violate any laws. End Note.)

[1](#)3. (C) Muslim women worldwide publicly criticized a General

Presidency
of the Two Holy Mosques Affairs proposal to shift the women's
prayer area
from the central circumambulation area in the Grand Mosque of
Mecca (Ref A).
The Washington, DC-based Muslim Writer's Alliance posted
online the petition,
which boasted over one thousand signatures and was circulated
in Saudi and
international media sources. The General Presidency rejected
the proposal
on September 11 and announced the decision to increase the
women's prayer
area to fifty-three percent of the mosque -- an increase that
answered the
complaint that women are allocated a significantly smaller
area for prayer
than men in the Grand Mosque. According to media reports,
Muslim women
globally are pleased with the decision, and Saudi
interlocutors expressed
the same to PolOff. The speed by which the General
Presidency responded
to public discontent regarding this issue demonstrates the
significance
of Mecca for Muslims around the world.

Pope's Remarks Unwelcome in Saudi Arabia

¶4. (C) The Saudi press expressed outrage at remarks made
about Islam and
the Prophet Muhammed at Regensburg University in Germany on
September 12.
The SAG sent a message on September 16 through Saudi Foreign
Minister Prince
Saud al-Faisal to the Vatican Foreign Minister demanding that
the Vatican
"issue a statement which reflects its real position about
Islam and its teachings,
as well as issue a clarification for the statement made by
Pope Benedict XVI."
Both mainstream and extremist media outlets have reported
negatively on the
Pope's remarks. Al-Jazeera summed up the sentiment of the
mainstream media
and the "Arab street" reaction by stating that the Pope's
comments were "not
only an historical fallacy, but also provoke the feelings of
well over a
billion Muslims and everyone who calls for dialogue among
civilizations and
religions and who is concerned for the stability of the
international community."

Shoura Council Back in Session

¶5. (C) The Shoura Council held its 33rd ordinary session on
September 10,
during which Chairman Sheikh Dr. Salih bin Abdullah bin
Homain talked about
the regional political situation, condemning Israeli
aggression in Lebanon
and supporting the SAG's humanitarian actions during the
conflict. The Council
then debated a draft regulation on combating cyber crime,
which was submitted
by the Committee for Transportation, Telecommunications, and
Information
Technology. Much of the debate focused on the use of blue
tooth technology
in mobile phones, which is perceived to be abused by the
younger generation
as a tool for subversive mixing of the sexes (Ref B). The
Council approved

the annual report from the Ministry of Transport, a draft agreement for scientific and technological cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and a draft agreement for cooperation in the field of sports and youth between Saudi Arabia and India.

16. (S/NF) The sentencing by a Colorado court of Homaïdan Al-Turki to 28 years to life imprisonment for sexually assaulting his Indonesian maid has provoked calls for boycotts of U.S. products and reduced travel and study in the U.S. Some Saudi contacts fear that this anger could encourage acts against Americans both inside and outside the U.S., including terrorist actions. Saudis in the U.S. and in the KSA agree with Homaïdan's claim that he received an unfair trial that focused on his religion and reflected U.S. prejudice against Saudis, Arabs, and Muslims in general. SAG officials have called the sentence imposed on Homaïdan "harsh" and vowed to take the case to the "highest levels," presumably to reduce the punishment in both the media and recent visits with USG officials. However, there has been little, if any attention on the victim. Even Saudi female contacts have seemingly ignored the seriousness of the charges and expressed strong dismay with the length of the sentence. Resentment of the U.S. could increase when Homaïdan faces a federal trial in October or if his appeal of the August 31 sentence is unsuccessful (Ref C).

VIP Visits

17. (U) King Abdullah met on September 3 with the French Defense Minister to discuss regional and bilateral developments. King Abdullah also discussed regional and bilateral issues with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on September 10 and Sudanese President Al-Bashir on September 11. King Abdullah met with U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan on September 4 regarding the

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situation in Lebanon and the role of the UN in implementing Security Council Resolution 1701 (septel). Additionally, they discussed Iraq and "Palestine" during the reportedly successful meeting. King Abdullah met with Lebanese Prime Minister Fu'ad al-Sanyurah on September 10 to discuss the steps needed to secure an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, reach a permanent ceasefire, and resolve the issue of Shab'a Farms.

18. (S/NF) Ambassador Oberwetter and Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad called on King Abdullah on September 12 to seek support on a range of issues relating to Iraq. Topics of discussion included Iranian influence in Iraq, the progress on legislation regarding the distribution of oil and natural gas resources and de-Ba'athification, militias, and resolution of the question of federalism. The King agreed to support a joint effort with the Kingdom, UAE, Jordan, and the U.S. to develop a strategy to stop the fighting and promote reconciliation, as well as

increased cooperation between
the SAG and Iraqi intelligence components on border control
issues. The King also
expressed continued support for U.S. efforts in Iraq (Ref D).

19. (U) On September 12-13, Deputy Assistant Secretary for
Democracy, Human Rights
and Labor Erica Barks-Ruggles met with several members of the
human rights community
and SAG ministries, along with women from the private sector
to discuss human rights,
democracy, and labor issues in the Kingdom in advance of the
Human Development Working
Group planned for later this year. She also traveled to
Jeddah where she met with
several leading women in the fields of education and health
to discuss current and
future partnerships between private Saudi institutions and
U.S.-based institutions
and government programs (septels).
OBERWETTER